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THE PRIMARIES -- CHOOSING THE CAST

ANNCR:

PRIMARY ELECTIONS HAVE NOW BEEN HELD IN THREE NORTHEASTERN STATES, THE SOUTHERN STATE OF FLORIDA AND THIS WEEK IN THE MIDWESTERN STATE OF ILLINOIS. CHARLES MEDD HAS A LOOK AT WHAT THE COMPLEX AMERICAN SYSTEM FOR CHOOSING PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES HAS ACCOMPLISHED.

VOICE:

THE 1976 ELECTION CAMPAIGN HAS BARELY BEGUN, BUT ALREADY THE SUDDEN AVALANCHE OF POLITICS HAS LEFT MUCH OF THE NATION SOMEWHAT DAZED, IF NOT CONFUSED. FIVE STATES HAVE NOW SPOKEN, AND VOTERS IN MORE THAN TWO DOZEN OTHER STATES WILL TAKE THEIR TURNS BEFORE THIS LONGEST-EVER SERIES OF PRIMARY ELECTIONS IS COMPLETE. IT'S STILL BEING ARGUED THAT THERE MUST BE A SIMPLER, MORE RATIONAL WAY FOR AMERICANS TO CHOOSE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, BUT THAT ARGUMENT WILL NOT BE RESOLVED FOR AT LEAST ANOTHER FOUR YEARS UNTIL WE GO AT IT AGAIN.

THE OSTENSIBLE REASON FOR PRIMARIES IS THE SELECTION OF DELEGATES FOR THE DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN NOMINATING CONVENTIONS. BUT IN THE EARLY STAGES OF ANY CAMPAIGN, THESE STATE-WIDE ELECTIONS SERVE A DIFFERENT PURPOSE -- TO GIVE THE VOTERS A CLOSE LOOK AT ALL CANDIDATES, WHETHER OR NOT THEY ENJOY THE BLESSINGS OF PARTY MANAGERS, AND BY A PROCESS OF ELIMINATION TO NARROW THE FIELD.

AS EXPECTED, THE REPUBLICAN SCENARIO HAS BEEN RELATIVELY EASY TO FOLLOW. RONALD REAGAN HAS CARRIED HIS CHALLENGE AGAINST GERALD FORD IN FIVE STATES, AND WITH VARYING DEGREES

OF EMPHASIS REPUBLICAN VOTERS HAVE SIDED WITH THE PRESIDENT. DESPITE HIS UNBROKEN STRING OF VICTORIES MISTER FORD HAS OBTAINED ONLY A FRACTION OF THE NUMBER OF DELEGATES NEEDED TO ENSURE HIS NOMINATION. THUS, MISTER REAGAN SAYS HE WILL REMAIN IN THE RACE IN THE HOPE THAT A PRESIDENTIAL BLUNDER WILL REVERSE CURRENT TRENDS.

FOR THE DEMOCRATS, THE PRIMARIES HAVE ALREADY PRODUCED SOME INTENDED RESULTS. THE VOTERS HAVE HAD THEIR FIRST LOOK AT A POLITICAL UNKNOWN NAMED JIMMY CARTER AND HAVE MADE HIM THE EARLY FRONT-RUNNER. AT THE SAME TIME, THE ELIMINATION PROCESS IS WELL UNDER WAY, WITH FIVE OF THE ORIGINAL CONTENDERS HAVING DROPPED OUT. STILL, THE DEMOCRATIC PICTURE IS FAR FROM CLEAR. FOR EACH DROP-OUT, THERE HAS BEEN A LATE ENTRY BY WHAT AMERICANS CALL "FAVORITE SONS" -- POLITICIANS LOOKING FOR SUFFICIENT NUMBER OF DELEGATES WITHIN THEIR OWN STATES TO INFLUENCE THE FINAL NOMINATING DECISION.

THE APPEARANCE OF FAVORITE SON CANDIDATES REDUCES THE CHANCE THAT ANY DEMOCRATIC CONTENDER WILL ARRIVE AT THE CONVENTION ASSURED OF VICTORY. THAT'S THE WAY IT WOULD HAVE BEEN HAD THERE BEEN NO PARTY PRIMARIES. AND WHILE THIS YEAR'S DEMOCRATIC PRIMARIES MAY NOT DETERMINE THE WINNER, THEY WILL DETERMINE THE CAST OF CHARACTERS ON HAND TO MAKE THAT CHOICE.

RCS